



The Mulberry Report

Solutions For Life

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Settling for Good Enough

By Elmer Wannemuehler, LCSW

Our society values personal characteristics such as being conscientious, having high expectations of self, and being committed to doing the right thing in the right way. People with these qualities tend to be good citizens, good employees and good family members. But is it possible to take these virtues to an extreme, to have too much of a good thing, so to speak, so that these good qualities actually become a burden for the person who has them and for other people who have to live and work with them? Actually it is possible to take these qualities to an extreme where they become real problems and are considered a disorder. The label that has been attached to this disorder is Obsessive-Compulsive Personality Disorder (OCPD).

Most people are familiar with Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder (OCD). OCD fits under the umbrella of anxiety disorders and involves recurrent and persistent thoughts (obsessions) that lead to repetitive behaviors or rituals that one feels driven to perform (compulsions) to reduce the distress or prevent some dreaded outcome. OCPD seems to be closely related to OCD but is considered a personality disorder. A person with OCPD has OCD tendencies but may not have the full-blown disorder. Someone has suggested that one can distinguish between OCD and OCPD by asking the question, Who is suffering more, me or others around me? If the answer is You, you probably are dealing with OCD. If the answer is Others, you are dealing with OCPD. People with OCD generally know they have a problem, while people with OCPD may not think they have a problem and often will not seek treatment because they believe that what they are thinking is right.

At work, having OCPD can be a mixed blessing. Employers and managers sometimes value this type of personality because they are very devoted to work, are very detail-oriented and concerned to do things exactly right. On the other hand, the employee with OCPD may be so devoted to work and productivity that he has no balance in his life and neglects leisure activities and social contacts. His preoccupation with details, rules, lists, order and organization can tie him up so tightly that he loses the main point of the activity. His perfectionism can get in the way of task completion because his performance in his mind is never good enough and he critiques and re-works each step of the way. Sometimes he is reluctant to start on a project because of the immensity

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“When nobody around you seems to measure up, it’s time to check your yardstick.”

- Unknown

References

Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders IV – TR

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John M. Oldham, M.D. and Lois B. Morris, [The Personality Self-Portrait.](#)

Settling for Good Enough

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of the task as he sees it. Very often this type of person does not make a good supervisor because he is overly critical of the performance of others, and cannot delegate because he knows the tasks done will not meet his high standards. Moreover, an insistence on observing even the most insignificant detail, and the need to micromanage, can lead to conflict with and alienation from fellow employees.

At home and in relationships a person with OCPD also presents a mixed picture. This type of person tends to be very conscientious and can be loyal, faithful, and will take very good care of their partner—but they are unemotional and unromantic about it. They tend to be more “into their heads” and are not in touch with feelings. They have a great sense of the way things “should” be, but sometimes they get caught up in what the late psychoanalyst Karen Horney termed “the tyranny of the shoulds.” This is the way it has to be! Unfortunately, they tend to insist that others live up to these standards and they can get very angry when others don’t comply. The person with OCPD values neatness, but again can take it to an extreme. His shirts are hung color coordinated, his sock drawer is perfectly organized, and her kitchen floor is so clean you could eat off it. People with OCPD tend to be frugal, but this often leads to being miserly. They tend to value things and this can result in being a pack rat. And again, they usually are convinced that their way of thinking is correct and they don’t see a need to change. They try to coerce others to meet their expectations and place excessive demands on family, friends and partners. People who live with an OCPD person readily agree with Freud who in 1908 labeled this personality as being very obsessive compulsive.

Persons with OCPD can get better but often it takes outside help. The first step is often the biggest, namely they have to recognize that they have a problem and must be willing to do something about it. Medication can help with obsessions and excessive rigidity. Cognitive-behavioral therapy may take a while but can result in more lasting changes. Some of the goals of therapy are to be able to “think in shades of gray,” to “soften the shoulds,” and to be comfortable with “good enough.”

Mr. Wannemuehler began his clinical social work career at St. Mary’s Hospital prior to joining the Mulberry practice group in 2003. His specialty area is marital counseling. His professional career covers 30 years.